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Strengthening Military, Support Our Troops

An overwhelming bipartisan majority backed legislation to strengthen our military, support our troops and improve military readiness this week.

The FY 2008 National Defense Authorization Bill was approved by a vote of 370 to 49. The bill is expected to be approved by the Senate and signed into law. The bill protects our troops and their families, and helps ensure that our fighting men and women have all the resources they need and deserve.

The bill authorizes new resources for additional Mine Resistant Ambush Protected Vehicles (MRAPs,) up-armored Humvees and body armor. The legislation also includes resources for efforts to stop Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) that have already injured and killed far too many American troops.

The legislation also includes critical support for troops by providing a deserved pay increase for troops and by blocking fee increases in the military health care program (TRICARE). Additionally, the bill includes the Wounded Warrior Act, which responds to the Walter Reed Army Medical Center scandal by improving the care of injured soldiers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan.

The men and women who risk their lives for our nation deserve the best equipment on the ground and the best medical care when they come home.

The Defense Authorization bill also takes

steps to remedy the Army readiness crisis

in America. Army readiness has dropped to

unprecedented levels, and Army National

Guard units only have, on average, 40%

of their required equipment. Furthermore,

many stateside units are not fully equipped

and would not be considered ready if called

upon to respond during an emergency.

The measure also helps restore our nation's

military readiness by creating a Strategic

Readiness Fund to address equipment short-

falls, fully funding the Army's and Marine

Corps' equipment reset requirements, and

authorizing new resources to provide the National Guard and Reserve

critically needed equipment.

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House Axes Washington County OLF Site

In approving the annual Defense Authorization bill, the House closed the door on the Navy's proposed outlying landing field in Washington County.

The House has taken the Washington County site off the table because it posed a danger to the community, pilots and aircraft. This sends a loud and clear message that if the Navy wants to move forward with an OLF it must have the support of the community.

The conference report on the FY 2008 National Defense Authorization Bill included language repealing "the authority for construction of an outlying landing field at Washington County, North Carolina."

The Navy has already purchased more than 2,000 acres in Washington and Beaufort counties as part of a 30,000-acre OLF the Navy says it needs in order to train pilots to land on aircraft carriers. The proposed site lies just west of an area that was established specifically as a waterfowl sanctuary where thousands of birds winter annually. At peak, there are about 25,000 tundra swans and more than 65,000 snow geese which regularly fly out to feed in the farm fields just west of the site.

More recently, the Navy has been working with the states of North Carolina and Virginia to find an alternative site.

Last month, I wrote to Navy Secretary Donald C. Winter to express concerns about OLF sites being considered in Gates and Camden counties. If the Navy moved forward in northeastern North Carolina, residents would be asked to bear all the economic and quality-of-life burdens with Virginia Beach enjoying all the benefits.

The small number of new jobs associated with the OLF simply could not offset the shock to the lifestyle and viability of these communities.

House Approves "Do-Not-Call" Improvements

The House this week passed two bills that will improve the highly popular federal "Do-Not-Call" Registry.

The Do-Not-Call Improvement Act of 2007, H.R. 3541, and, the Do-Not-Call Registry Fee Extension Act, H.R. 2601, were passed by unanimous voice votes. The Do-Not-Call Improvement Act eliminates the automatic removal of telephone numbers currently included on the federal 'Do-Not-Call' registry, while Registry Fee Extension Act authorizes the Federal Trade Commission to continue collecting fees from telemarketers to pay for operating the Do-Not-Call list through 2012.

During Floor debate, I managed the time for majority. I made the following statements during the debate:

Do-Not-Call Improvement Act of 2007

Mr. Speaker, H.R. 2601 was introduced by the distinguished ranking member of the Subcommittee on Commerce, Trade and Consumer Protection, Mr. Stearns, and is a bill to extend the authority of the Federal Trade Commission to collect the fees that administer and enforce the provisions relating to the National Do-Not-Call registry.

In 2003, Congress passed the Do-Not-Call Implementation Act, which authorized the FTC to establish fees sufficient to implement the National Do-Not-Call registry as originally authorized by the Telemarketing and Consumer Fraud and Abuse Prevention Act of 1994. I don't think it's hyperbole to say that this may quite possibly be one of the most popular laws and government initiatives in history.

Consumers have registered more than 146 million telephone numbers since the registry became operational in 2003. The FTC's authority to annually establish the appropriate level of fees to charge telemarketers for access to the Registry expires in 2007, and Mr. Stearns's bill as amended in the Energy and Commerce Committee renders that authority permanent.

If Members of Congress wish to avoid the wrath of millions of angry constituents who are being called by telemarketers during dinner time, it is in our best interest to facilitate the continuing operation of the Do-Not-Call Registry and vote for this bill.

As is the case with the vast majority of the legislation passed out of the Subcommittee on Commerce, Trade, and Consumer Protection, of which I am a Member, this is a bipartisan bill that was crafted in consultation with the appropriate agency of expertise, in this case, the FTC.

The bill passed the subcommittee by voice vote on October 23rd, and a week later, on October 30th, it was unanimously approved in the full Energy and Commerce Committee. It is fully deserving of quick passage on the floor of the House of Representatives. As usual, Majority and Minority Committee staff worked together on this bill, and Ranking Member Stearns, as well as Ranking Member Barton of the full committee, should be commended for their ongoing cooperation with Chairman Dingell and Chairman Rush. I urge a yes vote, and I retain the balance of my time.

Do-Not-Call Registry Fee Extension Act

Mr. Speaker, I yield myself two minutes.

The bill we now consider on the floor is related to the previous bill we just adopted. H.R. 3541, the Do-Not-Call Improvement Act of 2007, ensures that Americans who signed up to be on the Do-Not-Call list remain on the Do-Not-Call list. As the law currently stands, consumers are automatically purged from the registry after a 5-year period and forced to re-register their phone numbers with the FTC.

Consequently, if we do nothing, of the 146 million telephone numbers that are currently listed on the Do-Not-Call registry, almost 52 million of those numbers will expire and once again be fair game for telemarketers. I guarantee you that the vast majority of these consumers are unaware that they must re-list their phone numbers.

As was the case with the previous bill, I don't think Members of Congress want to incur the wrath of millions of angry constituents who thought they were safe from the nuisance of telemarketers, but are once again getting their pestering phone calls. I might also add that September 28 – the date in which 52 million numbers will expire – is right before Election Day...

The authors of the bill, Mr. Doyle of Pennsylvania and Mr. Pickering of Mississippi, are both valued Members of the Energy and Commerce Committee, and they are to be commended for their bipartisan cooperation. On October 30th, the bill was amended at full committee mark-up to require the FTC to periodically scrub the Do-Not-Call registry to remove phone numbers that have been disconnected or reassigned and further requires the Commission to report to Congress on the accuracy of the registry.

As such, H.R. 3541 ensures that the Do-Not-Call list is fair and accurate and that only those American consumers who do not wish to be called by telemarketers are on the registry.

This is a thoughtful, bipartisan piece of legislation, and I urge its adoption.

I retain the balance of my time.

Pushing for Children's Health Care Coverage

Thirty four legislators joined me in a plea for funding needed to continue a highly successful federal-state children's health insurance program.

Healthcare coverage for many children across our country is in serious jeopardy. Congress must reauthorize the State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP) immediately with enough funding to cover predicted shortfalls.

This week, a third short-term extension of SCHIP was set to expire and a long-term bill has yet to make its way through Congress after two vetoes by President Bush that were narrowly sustained.

The Congressional Research Service (CRS) recently estimated that if current FY 2008 allotments were extended for the entire year, 21 states, including North Carolina, would face shortfalls totaling \$1.6 billion. Under that scenario, CRS also estimates that nine states would completely exhaust funding as early as March of 2008.

With this in mind, I wrote a letter to House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer to urge a quick resolution of the problem. I was joined on the letter by 34 House members from the 21 states facing shortfalls.

The program protects children from families who earn too much to be covered by Medicaid, but earn too little to afford private health insurance. Known in North Carolina as Health Choice for Children, the SCHIP requires premium payments and co-pays based on ability to pay and it protects 6.6 million children, including almost 200,000 in North Carolina.

Providing all children access to affordable, quality health care is not a political issue but moral imperative. This is something Congress must get done.

Seeking More Answers in Wilson Murder Case

Following a request for federal authorities to determine whether the constitutional rights of a Wilson, N.C. resident are being violated, I have expressed my concerns to the head of North Carolina's court system.

This week I wrote to North Carolina Administrative Office of the Courts Director Ralph Walker to express my concerns with the protracted prosecution of James Johnson. I also asked a series of procedural questions in the hopes of clearing up questions being asked by constituents.

"Mr. Johnson is living in a state of uncertainty and his constitutional right to a speedy trial is being violated," I wrote in the letter to Walker. "The citizens of Wilson County are likewise confused about the handling of the case and negative attitudes about the criminal justice system are emerging. The accused and the public deserve to have this case finally decided."

In 2004, Mr. Johnson was charged with several felony offenses including first-degree murder. The charges were brought after a co-defendant implicated Mr. Johnson as a participant in the kidnapping, rape and murder of 17-year-old Hunt High School graduate Brittany Willis. The co-defendant subsequently recanted his assertion that Mr. Johnson participated in the crime; plead guilty to first-degree murder and is now serving a life sentence without parole.

After serving more than three years in pre-trial confinement, prosecutors agreed to a bail reduction and Johnson was released under a \$60,000 property bond.

The prosecutor has withdrawn from the case and an attorney has been appointed by the Administrative Office of the Courts to review the evidence. The North Carolina Attorney General refused to assume responsibility for the case following the prosecutor's withdrawal.

While an attorney has reportedly been reviewing the case, information is not readily available regarding the timetable for completion of the process. It is also unclear whether the special prosecutor's decision will be advisory or a final prosecutorial decision. It is my hopes that a reply from Mr. Walker will clear up those questions.

In the meantime, Mr. Johnson remains charged with first-degree murder and related felony offenses.

Last week, I wrote to wrote to U.S. Attorney General Michael B. Mukasey to urge a federal investigation of Mr. Johnson's case.